

Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion

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Abstract. *This article contends that teaching more effectively for diversity requires a radical re-envisioning of pedagogical practice. Drawing on qualitative interviews with religion and theology professors of color throughout the United States, it explores how faculty can re-imagine their teaching by engaging students where they are, acknowledging the reality of oppression, and dealing with resistance. Stressing mindfulness of social location, it provides examples of liberating teaching activities and competences and shows how literary and visual “texts” from the margins and personal metaphors of embodiment can challenge captivities to hegemonic paradigms in the classroom. The article concludes with responses from colleagues who have worked closely with the author. Ethicist Melanie Harris brings Hill’s method into dialogue with Womanist pedagogy, and historian of religion Hjamil Martínez-Vázquez reflects on the role of suffering in building a revolutionary/critical pedagogy.*

Introduction

This article highlights issues and describes teaching strategies that have emerged from a year-long collaborative research project¹ on teaching for diversity and social justice. The project was focused on discovering liberating teaching strategies that could empower all educators, especially those who are white, to confront ideologies of white privilege,² social class dominance, and male chauvinism. The strategies were culled from in-depth interviews – primarily with faculty of color – and class observations throughout the United States. The guiding assumptions behind the project were that all of us who teach in U.S. higher education are steeped in interlocking systems of

¹ The project, “Teaching Ethics in the Borderlands: Re-envisioning the Teaching of Social Ethics in U.S. Higher Education,” was funded by a \$70,000 Individual Study Leave Grant from the Wabash Center. Beginning in September 2006, I conducted extensive interviews with thirty-nine professors and forty-eight of their students in twenty different colleges, universities, and seminaries in the US.

² “White privilege” refers to systematically conferred privileges white persons receive simply because they are white. See the African American educator Beverly Tatum, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” – And Other Conversations about Race (1997). For critical perspectives from white authors, see Jennifer Harvey’s discussion in *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty* (2007) and Peggy McIntosh’s list of such privileges in “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” *Center for Research on Women: Working Paper Series* (1988).

oppression,³ and that there is thus a need to re-imagine teaching by identifying and nurturing liberating teaching strategies. My particular focus was on teaching for diversity and justice in religion and ethics.

The thesis of the project was that such re-imagining, in today's increasingly pluralistic society, requires that educators be much more intentional about encountering "differences" – different races, ethnicities, genders, and classes. Following the Latina theologian Gloria Anzuldúa I adopted the interpretive metaphor of the "borderlands." In Anzuldúa's work (1999), "borderlands" are understood in broad terms as emotionally-laden spaces where persons of different racial, ethnic, gender, and social class identities come into meaningful contact. Re-conceptualizing the classroom in U.S. higher education as a borderlands zone, I sought to discover how educators can utilize borderlands' encounters to effectively confront the elephant in the classroom; namely, the complex nexus of systems of advantage, with a special focus on white privilege.

This article represents an initial sampling of some of the ideas that surfaced in that larger project. I begin by describing my own social location as a white male, provide background on my method and research agenda, and then describe some of the insights I have discovered about teaching for diversity, with a special concern for racial justice. Finally, I invite you to reflect on responses to my remarks from two colleagues at Texas Christian University: Dr. Melanie L. Harris and Dr. Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez.

Personal Reflections on Social Location

Growing up as a white, Anglo, middle class male in the United States, I have not only felt ashamed of this nation's legacy of colonialism and white privilege, but have also felt culturally incomplete and spiritually impoverished. Consequently, as a college student, I jumped at an opportunity to visit Nigeria as a participant in the Crossroads Africa exchange program. The following year, I returned to Nigeria to interview Yoruba divining priests and learn about African philosophy. These experiences propelled me into the study of world religions and, later, a teaching career that has spanned three continents. Although I consider myself a work in progress, and labels are often as misleading as they are helpful, I would characterize myself as an *intercultural Christian humanist*.

I put the "intercultural" part first because the bulk of my teaching and research has been in the Two-Thirds world and has focused on understanding the values and perspectives of peoples of other cultures, primarily in Jamaica, Fiji, and South Africa. Indeed, I use the word "intercultural"⁴ because in some ways I *am* a nexus of different cultural experiences. That is to say, something of the Fijian way, Rastafarian ideology, and moral force of the anti-apartheid movement has rubbed off on me. The "Christian" part refers to my primary socialization growing up as a Presbyterian preacher's kid in rural Nebraska, brief stints as an ordained minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and occasional but rich experiences of community with Christians, especially in Jamaica and Fiji. Finally, the "humanist" aspect reflects my self-identification with

³ "Oppression" is the unjust exercise of power by one or more groups to put down, demean, or otherwise manipulate or control another group of people. Jamaican Rastafarian poets speak of oppression in terms of how certain social elites "step on others to gain" and "down-press" people.

⁴ I am indebted to the womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher for introducing me to the term "intercultural."

pragmatic and skeptical strains of the Scottish and German Enlightenments (as far as I am aware, my ancestors were Scotch-Irish and German), and friendships with secularist scholars in theological studies, the humanities, and the sciences.

For the past eight years, I have taught religion courses at a highly privileged institutional location – Texas Christian University (TCU). While at TCU, I have struggled with several issues in the classroom, including: “How do those of us who teach in predominantly white institutions (especially those of us who are white males) help our largely white, Anglo, affluent students value and respect differences in the classroom?” “How can I create ‘safe’ places (if indeed I should be creating such places), build ‘communities,’ and yet teach about cutting-edge justice issues from within the cocoon of the American Empire?” “How can I discover, articulate, and institutionalize ‘borderlands competencies’ in assessment instruments?”

The Research Method and Agenda

In order to seek answers to these questions, I have developed a research method, what I call an “autocritical liberatory ethnography,” in which I strive to take both the limitations and the contradictions of this highly privileged social location into account.⁵ Briefly, the method is “autocritical”⁶ because it entails a searching self-examination concerning my own biases and predispositions, or what Maduro calls my “partialities” (1982, 33). Such an examination cannot be done in a vacuum. Thus, in part to uncover my own partialities, I assembled a Project Advisory Group (PAG)⁷ think tank of colleagues who were vitally concerned about teaching for diversity and justice, but who represented different social locations than my own. The group included two Latinos, three African American women and one white woman.⁸ Thus, although this article reflects my own articulation of ideas, it is also the result of an ongoing, interactive reflection process. And, by including responses from two of the colleagues who served on the PAG, I hope to convey in print something of the conversational, interactive nature of the work of the PAG. As such, this article represents the collective insights of an active and committed working group rather than simply the solitary ruminations of an individual scholar.

The method is “ethnographic” because it is based on original field research to discover and articulate stories and experiences of teaching from a diverse range of

⁵ I plan to develop a detailed account of this methodology in a forthcoming book on the larger research project, *Becoming Neighbors with Strangers: Teaching for Justice in the U.S. Borderlands*.

⁶ For my understanding of “autocritical,” I draw on the liberationist writings of the Latin American Sociologist of Religion Otto Maduro, especially his early work, *Religion and Social Conflicts* (1982).

⁷ The members of the PAG were Marcia Riggs, J. Erskine Love Professor of Christian Ethics, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA; Francisco Lozada, associate professor of New Testament and Latina/o Church Studies, Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, TX (formerly Thomas A. French Chair in Religious Studies, University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, TX); Melanie Harris, assistant professor of Religion, TCU, Fort Worth, TX; Hjamil Martínez-Vázquez, assistant professor of Religion, TCU; Elaine Robinson, associate professor of Theology and Methodist Studies, Brite Divinity School; Claire Sanders, instructor of History, TCU; and myself as Project Director.

⁸ Furthermore, the PAG assisted me in developing, implementing, and evaluating the project. The PAG met for half-day consultations, conference calls, and occasional planning meetings.

educators.⁹ Adapting and modifying the meta-ethnographic approach of Ada María Isasi-Díaz (see *En La Lucha/In the Struggle: A Hispanic Woman's Liberation Theology* 1993), the research centered on in-depth, open-ended conversations, where the interviewer strives to establish empathetic dialogue with informants in a "joint effort to understand and articulate meaning" (Isasi-Díaz 1993, 68).¹⁰ A base of knowledge is constructed by sifting through the commonalities and differences in various accounts of lived experiences. Then, by creatively bringing these accounts in relation to one another, "generative themes" are discerned (70, 132). Throughout the process, there is an eye toward being taught by the people one is interviewing, and to learn how they construct their own understandings.

Finally, my method is "liberatory" because it aims to use these stories and experiences to liberate all of us as educators from oppressive pedagogical theories and patterns of teaching. It seeks to uncover "liberating resources," or themes, texts, or strategies that prompt a re-envisioning or a re-imagining of how we "see" what is – and what might yet be – the case. Most of the time, we white educators approach the world with fairly taken-for-granted predispositions that essentially reflect what we have learned from our predecessors. When this taken-for-granted consciousness is coupled with our "embeddedness" in predominately white institutional contexts, it becomes very difficult to see the world anew. On the other hand, by discerning how faculty of color integrate experiences of marginalization into their teaching, it becomes possible to identify fresh, provocative existential themes; see new ways to interpret and engage texts; appreciate the importance of embodiment in teaching; develop creative strategies for dealing with resistance from students and colleagues; and articulate borderlands' outcomes.

Taking the teaching of ethics in U.S. higher education as an example, although most recent population studies point to dramatic increases in the growth of non-Anglo groups in the country, such teaching still primarily reflects white, Anglo perspectives.¹¹ And yet, Anglo perspectives constitute only one set of interpretive lenses on the nature of social reality. They often presuppose privileged assumptions about race and ethnicity that do not reflect the experiences of scholars of color (for the latter, see especially the responses from Drs. Harris and Martínez-Vázquez below). In sum, this article focuses on naming liberating resources in the hope of dismantling some of the power dynamics of the "elephant in the room."

I also view this project as constituting groundwork for future research on ethics in the U.S. that seriously attends to the changing multicultural demographics of the country.¹² But how, the reader may ask, is research focused on the practice of teaching

⁹ I assembled a database of over one thousand pages of formal interview transcripts, additional field notes on class observations, publications of relevant research, and ongoing paper and electronic correspondence of consultations with scholars. The bulk of the interviews were audio recorded.

¹⁰ In research parlance, the "unstructured qualitative interviews" generally lasted between sixty and ninety minutes each, and were followed up with additional conversations.

¹¹ In a survey of introduction to ethics courses in U.S. seminaries, Bounds and Snarr (2004) found that few of the "contemporary-oriented" courses in ethics assigned readings from Asian American, Latino, indigenous, or Two-Thirds world authors.

¹² There is a need to update and expand upon Robert Bellah's [et al.] now dated work on ethics in the U S – Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (1986) – by enlisting an ethnically and racially diverse corps of colleagues in a new major survey that takes the current ethical pulse of a rapidly

related to more theoretical discourse about ethical norms and values? Following Paulo Freire (1999), I am convinced that pedagogical praxis is prior to theoretical principles. In his seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation* (1988), Gustavo Gutiérrez argued that theology was a “second act” that was grounded in a “first act” of the lived experience of religious (in this case, Christian) persons. In effect, “praxis” (or action that has been reflected upon) is prior to theory, and the latter both re-presents the praxis and is necessarily linked to and bound up with the praxis. Therefore, to properly understand the sources of any theology, one must immerse oneself in a terrain of praxis that has given rise to the theology. Applying this logic to ethics, I contend that if I – and other professors who are concerned to teach for diversity and justice – can really understand how it is that we teach, including how we utilize the presuppositions, concepts, and intentions that we bring to bear in our teaching, we will begin to unearth the actual moral substructures implicit in our teaching. In short, in order to find out where ethics is headed in our rapidly changing, pluralistic society, the key is to discover how folks who are teaching about valuing and respecting differences are in fact doing that.

In the broadest terms, there were two overarching but interrelated parts to the larger research project: (1) changing classroom dynamics and (2) transforming institutional contexts. In this article, I will address the first foci, but want to stress that in the final analysis, it is not possible to separate the two parts. That is to say, unless and until our institutions tackle the problem at a structural level, those of us who try to promote diversity in our teaching will usually be working against the grain. Let us now consider a few classroom strategies for teaching for diversity and justice, with a particular concern for racial justice.

Teaching More Effectively for Diversity

In the classroom, teaching for diversity needs to be grounded in engaging students where they are. This assumes, of course, that educators either know or can know “where students are.” During my research, professors spoke repeatedly of the need to help students articulate their identities. Virtually all the faculty I interviewed knew each of their students by name, as well as something about each student’s cultural or religious background. But often professors went further. To get to know their students – most of whom were white, straight, affluent, Anglo Americans – these professors began by prompting students to articulate their own diverse identities.¹³ One method was to ask students to give themselves an extended hyphenated name, with the professor providing an example. For instance, in my case I have said something like, “I am a white-midwestern-intercultural-straight-affluent-Christian-humanist-professor-husband-father-aging-ally.” A variation on that approach was to simply begin with an “I am” fill-in-the-blank writing exercise. Another popular method was to challenge students to complete a

changing North America. Such a corps could relate directly to, and speak the language of, the growing numbers of Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and “others” who have been largely ignored in earlier ethics surveys.

¹³ See “Practical Teaching Strategies” in appendix A. I am indebted to Kathi Breazeale, associate professor of religion at Pacific Lutheran University; Diane J. Goodman, author of *Promoting Diversity and Social Justice: Educating People from Privileged Groups* (2001); and Christine A. Stanley, editor of *Faculty of Color: Teaching in Predominately White Colleges and Universities* (2006) – for many suggestions regarding practical teaching strategies.

social location activity.¹⁴ In the process of defining social locations, all sorts of differences emerge, such as racial and ethnic heritages; rural versus urban experiences; varying political and religious orientations; and particular allegiances to pets, causes, or persons. As students reflect further, distinct value sets, views of the “other,” and understandings of the world begin to surface. Yet another approach is to ask students to share narratives of decisions, struggles, or formative influences. The idea is that if students can begin to articulate and affirm their own diverse cultural identities – their essentially multi-faceted selves – then they will be in a better position to engage “others” who are different from them as well. If everyone is “intercultural” in some way or other, then it becomes harder to reduce “others” to uncritical stereotypes.

Of course, the task of helping students articulate their identities assumes that we, especially we white, Anglo professors, already know who and where we are. I am reminded of an excellent book on mindfulness meditation entitled, *Everywhere You Go, There You Are* (Kabat-Zinn 1994). I cannot escape from *me*. Yet the thesis of the book is that in today’s U.S. society, many of us do not really know ourselves as *social* selves. If educators have not self-consciously reflected on their own social locations, vocational agendas, and self-understandings, how can they be expected to model a critical pedagogy for their students? While conducting interviews I asked professors to imagine a metaphor that evoked who they were as educators, and was often moved by the responses. One saw herself as a “cojourner,” one who goes on a journey with students, sojourning to new places with them. Another saw himself as “a set of windows” through which students see the world afresh, at different times and from different angles. Yet another viewed himself as a “midwife” facilitating a “seeing of the light” when the infant emerges, bringing into being something potentially present. These are rich metaphors that can help us, whatever our social locations, to begin to re-imagine our vocations as teachers. Moreover, the professors who provided these metaphors also helped students discover and name their own complex identities by transparently modeling these analogies.

After engaging students where they are, the main task is to help them acknowledge the reality of oppression. Students generally have a rough idea about prejudice; that is, an individual bias based on negative stereotypes. And most are pretty sure that *they* are not prejudiced. But, when it comes to oppression – that is, to the sanctioning and nurturing of systems of inequality that are woven throughout social institutions and embedded within individual consciousness – most white, Anglo, affluent students have real difficulty getting the picture. Racism is what Ku Klux Klan members do. Slavery was abolished eons ago. Women can do everything men can do. So what is the problem?

The problem is that there is a failure to see how all sorts of language and behavior reinforce what continues to be an uneven playing field. What interviewees tell me repeatedly is that racism – a system of inequality based on race (Tatum 2003, 7) – is alive and well on our university campuses. To begin to confront racism, all of us who profess bodies of knowledge in the academy need to do some soul-searching regarding internal resistances to examining our own social locations. I think that those of us who are white liberals are particularly afraid of this, because we live with a lot of moral inconsistencies. But if we really assess how structural and material constraints signifi-

¹⁴ See appendix B. I am indebted to Mai Anh Tran, who teaches on the faculty of the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, Calif., for sharing a version of this activity with me.

cantly shape our life choices and senses of possibility, we can be better equipped to guide our students. Then, building on something like the social location activities noted above, we can begin to help students see how their own social locations predispose them to interpret behavior. This process, in turn, leads to exposing students to voices from the margins.

At this point, we are likely to encounter resistance big time. Videos or face-to-face encounters with those of different races and classes can be extremely challenging, discomforting, and frightening to adolescents and young adults raised in narcissistic, relatively monocultural enclaves of affluence. But it is a necessary step toward education for diversity and social justice. In 2006 at Arcadia University, all the students in a required core course read about and watched the documentary film, *The Laramie Project* (2002).¹⁵ The film depicts the murder of a gay student at the University of Wyoming. The next night they heard from the murdered student's mother, who visited campus and spoke about her family's journey toward the acceptance of same-gender-loving persons. One student at the Pacific School of Religion spoke of how her whole perspective was changed when she saw the film *The Color of Fear* (1994). In the movie, two white individuals – a liberal metro and a redneck retro – encounter one another. The redneck is clear about his racist attitudes. The liberal claims to be non-racist. But by the end of the film, the liberal begins to recognize his own racism, and the viewer begins to find the liberal at least as morally reprehensible as the redneck.

Another student at the Pacific School of Religion told about a class exercise in which he approached and talked to a homeless person and then imagined that this person was kin to him. This exercise prompted the student to change how he thought about the ways he and others at his school treated panhandlers on campus. At Hawaii Pacific University, students attended a weekend writing workshop in which they met and spoke with indigenous local writers. These students came away with a whole new appreciation of the range and scope of what constitutes proper English and, by extension, legitimate literary expression.

But such “breakthrough” learning experiences are often more the end product of teaching for diversity, and do not come without lots of angst, struggle, pain, and thinly veiled hostility. For faculty, especially faculty of color, teaching about diversity in predominately white institutions represents a minefield. Part of the problem is the Euro-American concern with preserving the illusion of a “culture of niceness” at all costs. We white people are afraid to acknowledge and confront genuine conflict. Yet one cannot really appreciate the reality of oppression without challenging comfort zones – those of the professor as well as the student. Faculty of color distinguished between creating a “safe space” in the classroom where students were protected from conflict, and creating a “space of trust” in which students could feel secure enough to move beyond the limits of their comfort zones. Nurturing safety for safety's sake encourages a kind of walking on eggshells around emotionally loaded issues. Building trust with the expectation that we will all grow and change together makes genuine, creative dialogue possible. As students of color argue, “We feel uncomfortable most of the time, why should the equilibrium of whites be protected? White professors need to shake up their students!”

Clearly, learning is inherently painful. As the Hispanic theologian Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez says (2006), “For those who think they are the only ones who matter, it is

¹⁵ I observed this course during my field research visit to Arcadia University, October 16–20, 2006.

painful to talk about the other!” But when students are hurting, we also need to be prepared to treat the wounds. Professors stressed the importance of not becoming defensive, unhinged, or emotionally thrown by racist, heterosexist, or ethnic slurs. Rather than focus on the student who makes the remark, it is important to focus on the statement itself. Ask questions about it. What does it assume about human beings? What evidence is there to support it? How would it feel to be on the receiving end? Where possible, shift the conversation to a text. If the text under discussion gives voice to a perspective from the margins, then attention can be redirected to experiences of the “other” that may have been ignored, glossed over, demeaned, or devalued in a student’s earlier remark.

There are lots of options here. We can bring companion teachers into class with us. We can sit down together with students and share our frustrations. We can be transparent about our own vulnerabilities in front of students. One Korean professor knows her students so well that she can call on certain ones in a pinch to address certain issues, so that she does not always have to be a lightning rod in difficult conversations.

Although seriously flawed in some respects, the movie *Freedom Writers* (2006), starring Hilary Swank, illustrates some important points about meeting resistance to diversity in the classroom. While the educational context of the film – an inner-city public high school – may seem far removed from many of our more ivory tower campuses, ripples of the inner city are lapping up against the shores of our higher education institutions. And, if we can look past Hollywood’s messianic, essentially cynical take on education, *Freedom Writers* evokes some pedagogically important themes.

First, by intercepting a racist depiction of a student and using it as a teaching moment, the teacher (affectionately named “Miss G” by her students) suddenly begins eliciting emotionally charged outpourings about racism, violence, white privilege, victimization, and despair. Second, she listens to the students’ outpourings in a seemingly nonjudgmental, patient, and caring manner. When a Hispanic student exclaims, “I hate white people!” Miss G does not get defensive, patronizing, or unhinged. Third, she invites students to tell their stories in ways that protect their privacy. Fourth, upon hearing their stories, she assigns texts that relate to the themes and experiences evoked in their stories. Fifth, she facilitates communication between her students and a living moral authority – a holocaust survivor – outside the classroom. Sixth, Miss G effectively utilizes learning activities that get the students to physically interact with each other around issues that are existentially compelling. Seventh, she takes students on a site visit to a holocaust museum where they can further explore themes they are reading about in the *Diary of Anne Frank*. Eighth, she participates in a fundraiser initiated by students, interacting with them on their own turf. Ninth, she facilitates the compilation of original student work for public dissemination. Although the creation of community in this racially and ethnically diverse class is somewhat artificial, strangers become friendly with strangers. Old suspicions of other ethnic groups fall away. Near the end, one student even describes coming to class as “coming home.”

In addition to classic works, such as the *Diary of Anne Frank*, other texts can be effectively utilized to facilitate an acknowledgment of the reality of oppression, including stories published in local newspapers, magazines, or other news outlets. Campus newspapers can be especially important “texts.” When students can see racism or classism up close – in their own backyards – it becomes harder to avoid. In interviews, college and university students often mentioned children’s stories in this connection, such as Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1992), as a learning tool for gender analysis (Alexander 2007). In the story, a boy takes and takes from a tree which is presented

as female until, at the end, there is nothing left of her but a tree stump. After reading the story in Boyung Lee's class at the Pacific School of Religion, students discuss whether or not this is a just portrayal of gender roles. Feminist perspectives drawn from Rosemary Ruether's *Feminist Theologies: Legacy and Prospect* (2007) inform the discussion.

Other narratives that provide grassroots engagement with oppression include Martin Luther King's *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* (1994). This work illustrates how to walk with those who suffer close at hand. It shifts the issue away from a preoccupation with oneself and one's own security, toward how to deal with a situation of struggle for liberation. Students have found other accounts of lived experience helpful in this regard, including bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* (1994); *Feet-On-The-Ground-Theology: A Brazilian Journey* (Boff 1987);¹⁶ and L. William Countryman's *Dirt, Greed and Sex* (1988).

But for maximum impact on radicalizing awareness about oppression, well-conceived site visits are perhaps the best pedagogical strategy available. A good example is the two-week field trip that students at the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest take to Mexico City and Cuernavaca. They visit "base communities,"¹⁷ stay overnight with Mexican families, and attend cultural events such as the Balet Floclorico. Regarding one of these visits, an Anglo student said, "We saw for ourselves the economic situation and learned why it is how it is. We also learned what people in Latin America are doing about the situation and what we can do here in North America" (Pederson 2006, 1).

In a series of interviews at Iliff School of Theology, Dr. Miguel De La Torre also discussed plans to take students to Cuernavaca, where they would visit squatters and an indigenous village in the mountains. Most of the time would be devoted to "interviewing the poor" and observing how they implement the praxis of solidarity. Participants on the field trip would also have economics professors from the University of Mexico, a representative from an advocacy group on AIDS, and a Zapatista revolutionary inform them about social uprisings and different activist organizations. De La Torre noted that the last time he led this trip, while teaching at Hope College, one student ended up staying in Mexico to work as a volunteer, two others later went back as volunteers, and "several of them changed their whole career course" with emphases on working for the oppressed.

An additional approach to confronting students with the reality of oppression is to try to elicit stories that deal with marginalization from white, affluent students. For example, the educator Peter Frederick¹⁸ describes how Lee Knepfelkamp, former professor of psychology and education at Columbia University, began her course by asking students to tell two stories: "One about an incident in their lives when they mattered and one when they felt marginalized." Along these lines, Frederick asked students to reflect on times when they personally experienced issues of discrimination or injustice and to tell stories about these incidents (Frederick 1995).

¹⁶ De La Torre has used this text with seminary students.

¹⁷ "Base communities" refer to local, grassroots intentional communities, often consisting of ten to twenty persons who gather to worship, pray, and reflect on social issues and personal problems in the light of Biblical scriptures. There are reportedly thousands of such communities in Brazil alone.

¹⁸ Frederick is Professor Emeritus at Wabash College, Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Such an exercise can have a liberating impact on students of color as well. For example, one of Dr. Micheline Soong's¹⁹ mixed race students expressed appreciation for being asked to introduce herself by sharing a story of an experience of inequality. She related a racist encounter that occurred in an upscale mall in San Francisco. Because several of Soong's classes have a wide range of ethnically diverse students, she is also able to generate the telling of stories of marginalization by staging humorous games such as "What's My Line?" in which one of three students on a panel is lying about something they did. In the process of trying to identify the prevaricator, the students in the class ask questions that elicit the very true stories of the other two students on the panel for that day. Playing games in this fashion may occasionally surface an experience of oppression in a nonthreatening, serendipitous way.

However, it was clear from class observations and interviews with students that in a class where everyone else is white, it is virtually impossible for a student of color to speak authentically about her or his experiences of race and ethnicity. In fact, in such situations there tend to be a "normalizing of abnormalities" such that there is a trivialization of genuine difference. The sole black student sticks out so much that she or he comes to be viewed as a token fixture, rather than as a unique human being who brings real differences into the social whole. Thus, any learning exercise that attends to students' own narratives of racial or ethnic oppression needs to be crafted carefully, to avoid an "othering" of the "other."

And finally, it is important for educators who are concerned about teaching for diversity and justice to reflect on assessment criteria. What are the anticipated goals or outcomes of teaching for diversity? In my larger research project, I have begun to assemble a brief list of what I call "borderlands competencies;" that is, creative strategies that emerge from lifelong intercultural experiences at the margins of society.²⁰ But such competencies are also context-specific, and will need to be adapted and revised in light of the particular racial and class dynamics in one's institutional location. This brings us full circle to the importance of sensitivity to how white faculty and faculty of color are often positioned very differently in the same institution. In the following essays, Drs. Melanie L. Harris and Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez speak to the issue of teaching for diversity from social locations that are very different from my own.

Response 1: Pedagogies for Human Transformation and Social Change

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Dr. Jack Hill's article, "Fighting the Elephant in the Room: Ethical Reflections on White Privilege and Other Systems of Advantage in the Teaching of Religion," is itself an instrument of grace and resistance. In it, he shares several teaching techniques that can be applied by any scholar in religion, ethics, or theology who honors diversity in

¹⁹ Micheline Soong is an associate professor of English at Hawai'i Pacific University in Honolulu, Hawaii.

²⁰ For a preliminary list of such competences, see appendix C.

our classrooms, and who honors the rich opportunities transformative teaching affords both the professor and the student. Perhaps most importantly, the article signals a new movement in the field of teaching and pedagogy that celebrates and values the teaching strategies and pedagogies of scholars of color in religion, ethics, and theology; scholars who often teach into the difficult issues of difference including race, religion, social class, gender, and sexual identity. The article illustrates how scholars committed to diversity can guide classrooms ready to erupt over conflicting religious ideas, political ideologies, and theological perspectives, and transform these moments into powerful interactions that promote respectful yet rigorous intellectual exchange, and human and social transformation.

In the essay, Hill discusses the subject of changing classroom dynamics in order to teach more effectively for diversity and confronting systems of oppression, such as institutional racism and sexism embedded in some of our institutions. The article embodies both theoretical analysis and practical approaches to teaching, and highlights some of Hill's own reflections on the challenges and joys of teaching Christian social ethics.

It also features several helpful teaching exercises developed by scholars of color with whom Hill has shared conversations regarding ways of engaging social justice issues in the classroom. For example, a social location exercise developed by Dr. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier and Dr. Evelyn L. Parker, and adapted by Dr. Mai-Anh L. Tran, helps to bring issues of diversity to the forefront when students engage intersections between religious beliefs, theological constructions, and social realities such as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia (see appendix B). This section of his essay also includes ideas on how social justice issues can be raised in the classroom in an effort to make students more aware of their connection to global realities like poverty, human slavery, and war.

The hospitable way in which teaching strategies and exercises are offered and shared by scholars engaged in the article is illustrated in the communal and dialogical tone that is carried throughout the work. As such, my response adds to the ongoing conversation, both as one that contributes new insights on teaching and pedagogy in religion from a womanist perspective, as well as one that is enhanced by the teaching reflections from a community of scholars who teach for diversity.

Womanist Pedagogy and Teaching for Diversity

I have gleaned a five-step pedagogical method from Hill's analysis that I believe is helpful for any scholar teaching for diversity. In my response, I will list these five steps and provide a womanist perspective that highlights the importance of taking the first step – acknowledging one's social location. I will also place Hill's pedagogical method in conversation with womanist pedagogy in hope of setting a foundation for continued dialogue.

The pedagogical steps that can be gleaned from Hill's article include the following: (1) acknowledge your own social location, (2) deal with resistance, (3) dismantle "safe spaces of niceness" in order to promote transformation, (4) deal with conflict with an ethic of care, and (5) share power as a way of creating a communal context of learning.²¹ In keeping with the first step, it is helpful to introduce my own social location by describing the womanist pedagogy I use in the classroom.

²¹ While these steps are not listed explicitly in Hill's article, they do provide a helpful frame towards developing new models for teaching and pedagogy that could be adapted by a teacher according to her or his own

Womanist pedagogy emerges out of the discipline of Womanist religious thought that centers on the theological, ethical, and religious perspectives of women of color, and particularly African American women. The term “womanist” was coined by the literary writer Alice Walker, and is akin to “feminist,” yet places greater emphasis on the significant ways racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism (as well as other forms of intersecting oppressions) contribute to religious understanding and theological interpretation. Due to the varied ways the ideas, identities, bodies of women of color, and particularly, bodies of African American women have been marginalized by culture and society throughout history, womanism offers strategies for uncovering these marginalized voices, and for naming them as valid sources of theological, ethical, and religious inquiry. In essence, womanism helps to uncover theological and religious perspectives that have been historically silenced. By treating the “everyday” ways of being, religious concepts, theological constructs, and moral codes of African American women seriously, womanist theory and praxis offers learners a chance to transform their ideas about religion by engaging the ideas and worldviews of those whose voices are often ignored.

Womanist pedagogy is a style of teaching that highlights the theological voices and ethical perspectives of those whose voices are heard from the margins (see Copeland 2006, 226–235). It engages theory and praxis as it helps students to examine social-political justice issues from a multilayered, theo-ethical perspective that highlights the impact racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of injustice can have on the establishment of community and wholeness in creation. Womanist pedagogy is described by Katie G. Cannon, the premier Christian womanist ethicist, as emerging out of the experience of African American women who are “challenging conventional and outmoded dominant theological resources, deconstructing ideologies that led us into complicity with our own oppression . . . [and who are stating that] . . . the imperative suggested by this pedagogy is an engaged scholarship that leads us to resist domination through mindful activism and helps all of us to live more faithfully the radicality of the gospel” (Cannon 1995, 137–138). As such, womanist pedagogy is designed to promote human, social, and at times spiritual transformation, and can be applied by scholars from a variety of religious traditions who acknowledge the importance of teaching for diversity.

Marcia Y. Riggs models the commitment to theory and praxis within womanist pedagogy in her book, *Plenty Good Room* (2003). Here she links the two by providing descriptive theo-ethical analysis regarding sexual and gender relations in traditional black churches, and by offering several constructive proposals that invite the reader/learner to take part in pedagogical exercises. These exercises both teach the reader/learner how to conduct power analysis in conversation with theological ideas, and promote a sense of agency in the reader/learner as he or she is encouraged to pose critical questions of his or her own theological ideas and contribute these ideas to the analysis (see “Dialogue” sections in Riggs (2003) 63, 90–91, 117–119).

perspective, be it liberationist, womanist, mujerista, latina/o, feminist, and so forth. The length of this article does not permit me to go into detail on each step; however, it is important to note that I believe that each of these steps can have a deep impact on creating healthy spaces to express diversity in the classroom and can contribute to how diversity can be embraced by professors and students outside of the classroom, across campus and in the wider community. I plan to discuss these ideas in more detail in my future research on teaching and pedagogy.

This latter step of promoting moral agency is in keeping with the principles of womanist pedagogy in that it honors students' social locations, life experiences, and perspectives as important parts of the learning process. That is, students' experiences are validated as useful sources in helping them learn skills in critical thinking and theological reflection. Emilie M. Townes's metaphor of the "womanist dancing mind" in her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006) is a brilliant example of how a womanist style of teaching is viewed as a partnership between teacher and student. Here, she builds upon Toni Morrison's idea of the "dancing mind" and invites both teacher and student to fully engage in the sacred moment of learning and join the "intimate, sustained surrender to the company of [our] own mind as it touches the mind of another" (Morrison 1996, 15). As teacher and student work together to "tease through the possibilities and the realities" presented by the world and raise questions about how to develop sustainable, relational, and ethical ways of living in community, they engage womanist pedagogy. Thus, they promote religious understanding and action that will help to answer public calls and "yearnings for a common fire banked by the billows of justice and hope" (Townes 2006, 2).

In sum, womanist pedagogy invites students to identify their own social locations, and to engage their religious ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality in conversation with social theorists, theologians and ethicists whose writings and perspectives shape the canons in various disciplines of study. Moreover, womanist pedagogy challenges students to determine how their religious ideas are informed by their social locations, and how socially accepted stereotypes about persons who hold marginalized status in society impact their own religious ideas about difference. By uncovering the ways religious ideas support and reinforce value judgments, students become more aware of the role religion plays in culture and society and how established societal norms influence religious understanding.

Womanist Pedagogy in Dialogue with Hill's Method

As we place a womanist pedagogy in conversation with Hill's pedagogical method, we find that many of the steps are in keeping with each other. Perhaps the most important step is the first – acknowledging one's own social location. Hill models this well in the article, as he includes analysis of his own social location as a white male Christian social ethicist who holds social justice and diversity as key components in his pedagogy. In the words of an African American colloquium, Hill "practices what he preaches" as he encourages readers to first acknowledge their own social location as an initial step towards teaching for diversity.

The dialogue between womanist pedagogy and Hill's method for teaching for diversity offers a sharp reminder for those using womanist pedagogy to take special account of their own social locations and the impact these have in particular learning environments. Considering the emphasis womanist religious thought places on self-love, human agency, and self-knowledge, it can be assumed that those who use womanist pedagogy need not be reminded about the unique contribution this kind of pedagogy makes towards achieving effective and transformative teaching in the classroom. Engaging Hill's article encourages scholars using womanist pedagogy to know the important value womanist epistemologies, wisdoms, and insights have for teaching in college, university, and seminary classrooms, as well as in communities beyond the ivory towers of the academy.

In addition, Hill's method suggests that part of the first step of acknowledging one's own social location is becoming aware of how *students* perceive your social location

(and the meaning(s) of this social location), in a particular learning environment. Consider how a woman professor of color's gendered and racialized body may be perceived by students in a predominantly white university, college, or seminary setting. White students who lack experience interacting with or receiving instruction from a person of color can face deep moments of cognitive dissonance as they struggle to make sense of a situation in which their racial privilege, which is normative in society, conflicts with the reality that a person of color has power over them – in this case, the authority to assign them a grade. Without careful attention to students' perceptions of professors' social locations in the classroom, teaching the content of religion, theology, and ethics can be complicated by the “silent script” about diversity running during the class. This silent script consists of questions that students may have about racial difference and how it impacts conversation and community in the classroom. This can include questions about whether or not it is “safe” to pose questions about race, and how a student might address her or his own struggle with living in the midst of diversity, as well as how to share these experiences.

The conversation about how to engage these silent or invisible scripts in our classrooms continues. It must. For being diverse, whether or not educators, students, and administrators want to admit this, is what we are doing everyday. Whether and how we can do this responsibly and with a sense of respect and celebration is the work we must continue to explore. Dr. Jack Hill's valuable research, and the conversations that are a part of it, are moving us all in the direction of sharing knowledge and transforming education systems in U.S. higher education.

Response 2:

Pains and Tears: Moving Beyond the Politics of Education

Hjamil A. Martínez-Vázquez

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“Clearly, learning is inherently painful.”

Jack Hill

I would venture to say that nobody likes to feel pain. If learning causes pain, then why would one want to enter in the process of learning? I dare to answer, “Well, because the pain deconstructs in order to re-construct.” I will illustrate this by talking about crying. While one can shed tears of joy, for the most part tears are usually signs of pain, either physical or emotional. People usually see the act of crying as a sign of vulnerability, and in some cases of weakness. We regularly use the expression “breaks down and cries.” This expression proves to be essential, as we understand the importance of pain in the process of learning. Only when our barriers are broken down – when we become vulnerable – do we become open to the possibility of change. Once we have had that opportunity for transformation (learning), we can see the world and ourselves more clearly.

Tears are responsible for cleaning and lubricating the eye, so that one can see better afterwards. The predicament with having the eyes cleaned is that we may not like what we are then able to see. The process of learning within the classroom is no different. Most people enter a classroom trying to find proof for what they already know, or to add

some information to their “database.” It is not about seeing something different, much less about feeling pain. Students, hiding behind data and information, fear the process of crying because their identity may be revealed, and they may become extremely vulnerable. But there is no learning if one cannot recognize one’s identity and social location. Encountering students in their social location causes pain for both the student and the teacher, because the former may not be aware of it and the latter may not be initially invited into that social location. Just as nobody likes the pain, nobody likes to feel vulnerable. We do not want to let just anyone in. Thus the question arises, “How do we deal with this pain – understanding that after crying we will be able to see clearly?” The first answer that comes to mind is that we should be confronting and challenging the pedagogical system (“the Elephant”) that prevents the opening of places for learning.

Deconstructing the Elephant: “Uncovering” Traditional Pedagogies

In the United States, the role of education and academia is defined by a colonial enterprise, by the enforcement of power. For example, the development and establishment of the “No Child Left Behind” initiative by government agencies has proven to be an instrument in that enforcement of power. Through this legislation, a form of education became normative, as if there is only one way to learn and as if knowledge is fixed. Those in power have control over what is taught, so they control what it is that is learned. “Standardized knowledge” is generated that everyone has to master, and the educational process becomes an instrument of domination that generates a competitive and individualistic environment.

Moreover, the capitalist system that sustains the economic scaffold in the United States has influenced the way we look at education. Good test scores mean more money for schools and, thus, competition takes over. Not only the school system engages in competition, but also the students become competitive in order to be in the highest rank of the class as they pursue scholarships and other educational opportunities. Because of the standardized form of education, only a few will be able to succeed because their learning styles will have to be a good fit with the testing culture. The classroom then becomes a setting for individualistic approaches to “learning,” and re-creates a culture that privileges the acquisition of data or information over the exercise of critical thinking. This process results in a privatization of knowledge. Further, this collection of data becomes the basis for a kind of “knowledge” that is owned by those who want to share it. As a result, imagination dies, as individuals are neither stimulated nor allowed to go beyond this static collection, and the mind is not extended. Knowledge becomes a product of the fast food category – already processed, cooked, and ready to be consumed. The classroom, thus, becomes the place where this packaged knowledge is obtained.

The teacher is the guardian of knowledge, not just as she or he “shares” it, but mostly as she or he prevents the student from going beyond the data presented. She or he becomes a border patrol that prevents the “crossing” between ideas, data, and imagination since domination and control are exercised as knowledge. Transgressions are not allowed. Students, in this fast food education, are passive learners, passive recipients of knowledge. There is no exchange of ideas within this type of pedagogy and students’ preconceived notions are not addressed or challenged, so students are not engaged participants. Thus, there is no particular learning, no particular pain, and there are no “cleaned eyes.”

Doing Away with the Elephant: Building a Revolutionary or Critical Pedagogy

Revolutionary or critical pedagogy begins with an active understanding of one's own social location, for student and teacher alike. Within this type of subversive pedagogy, there is no normative knowledge and no particular knowledge to pass down. However, there is space for the construction of knowledge. Everyone involved speaks from his or her particular social location because it is this difference of perspectives that illuminates knowledge. It begins with the vulnerability of the participants, both teacher and student, and the recognition of the pain of self-discovery in order to achieve change.

"Transgression" becomes the essence of critical pedagogy, as established knowledge and traditional ways of understanding are going to be challenged. Traditional authorities have no power within this space as they become participants like everyone involved. Within traditional pedagogy, the end result guides the process of learning; the teacher understands this and tries to impose her or his particular ideology in light of that desired result. Following a subversive approach to education, the process of learning in itself guides the teaching, so the teacher involves the student in a development of understanding in which the end result is not pre-determined. This is comparable to Freire's *conscientización*, as it goes from confrontation (of the system) to self-awareness (identity construction and social location) to rearticulation (construction of a new world).

The "multicultural ideology" has neutralized the pedagogical process by taking the transgression and transformative aspects away by essentializing the concepts of race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and class. It has taken the pain away so there is no process of engagement between the teacher and the student. Everything is defined, nothing is constructed, and there is no place for revelation. Only through the cleansing of our eyes can we examine the false concepts of justice, equality, and democracy that the elephant in the room promotes and wants us to acquire as products through the fast food educational system. Revelation happens only when we can see beyond the present reality, when there is a space of imagination. Knowledge is a process of revelation, and in order to experience and engage it, our eyes need to be clean and open to the possibility of another world, not after death, but in the here and now.

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APPENDIX A

Practical Teaching Strategies: Examples of Ideas for Starting a Class

(Collected by Jack Hill, during Borderlands Research Project – 2006/2007)

I. Provide students with opportunities to shape the learning agenda

- Begin by establishing ground rules together
- Ask students to write a reflection paper on a video that they may or may not relate to course themes, and let them know part of that will be utilized in your assessment of their progress in the course (e.g., on the final exam)
- Take account of different ways of knowing (e.g., cognitive, affective, and psychic-motor) in developing assignments and making assessments of student

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learning (e.g., encourage final projects that use drawing, dramatizations, or photography)

- Ask a different student to begin each class with a “quiz” or set of open-ended questions from the readings

II. Get to know students (and help them get to know themselves) by assisting them in naming and articulating their own identities

- Bring a big ball of string to class. Arrange students in a circle. Holding the ball, introduce yourself to the class (name, hometown, what you teach, and something unusual about yourself). Then toss the ball to someone else and ask him or her to do the same thing. Then ask that person to toss it to yet a third person and so on, until everyone in the circle has held the ball. (There should now be a spiderweb in the room, which can be a teaching moment about creating community in the classroom and learning from one another.)
 - Encourage openness, honesty, and transparency by sharing your own diverse identity (i.e., do what you are going to ask them to do).
 - Have students fill in the blank: “I am _____,” and share in small groups. Collect, distill, and share observations in the following class.
 - Ask students to give themselves an extended hyphenated name by stringing lots of identifiers together (e.g., I am a mixed race-young-classy-Asian American-European-heterosexual-woman-agnostic-physically challenged-Cancer), have them share these in small groups, and then have each group create concentric circle diagrams that show how the members of that group share some identifiers but do not share others.
 - Do a variation of a “social location activity.”
 - Ask direct open-ended questions, such as: “What have you been taught at home about race?” “What was your earliest experience of realizing that you were white (or whatever racial category that you self-identify with)?”
 - Invite students to create collages, “mini-zines” (mini-magazines), photo albums, slide shows, poems, songs, or short stories that express where they come from, who they are, and what they feel most keen about – and to bring these to class.
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APPENDIX B

A Social Location Activity

(Adapted from Mai-Anh L. Tran’s version of an activity developed by Dr. Elizabeth Conde-Frazier and Dr. Evelyn L. Parker)

Define your social location in terms of the following factors:

- Race
- Ethnicity
- Nationality
- Gender
- Sexual Identity

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- Political Affiliations
- Religious Affiliations
- Other Allegiances
- Experience of key historical/social events
- Hometown and Neighborhood (past/present)
- Experiences that have prompted changes in your social location (e.g., shifts in socioeconomic status, educational attainment, other?)

Respond to the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs and practices of my racial/ethnic group as well as other aspects of my social location as pertains to RACE, SEXUALITY and CULTURE?
 2. What values are inherent in these practices?
 3. Whom do these values benefit?
 4. What are the relationships that result from my social location?
 5. What is the nature of these relationships?
 6. Which of these identity groupings is in tension with another?
 7. What do these identity groups imply as far as my sphere of influence?
 8. Who is the “other” within my relationships?
 9. How does this set of lenses color the way I see and understand the world?
 10. What is the knowledge that these bring to my work as a student or researcher?
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APPENDIX C

Borderlands Competencies: Some Initial Ideas

(Collected by Jack Hill during Teaching in the Borderlands Research Project – 2006/2007)

The following ideas represent examples of assessment outcomes that reflect “borderlands competencies” – or *sets of creative, adaptive strategies that emerge from life-long intercultural experiences in the margins of society*. They are presented in rough form; that is to say, they have not yet been fully translated into outcomes nomenclature.

As a result of this educational experience, students will be able to:

1. Question the questions: To ask, “What paradigms, frameworks, or patterns of thought are being presupposed in this question?” (Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, associate professor of Latino Theology and Mission, Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest, Austin, Tex.)
2. Identify and critique stereotypical images of race, ethnicity, class, and other categories of diversity that represent misinformation about, or demeaning characterizations of, those who are “other” to us. (Micheline Pesantubbee, assistant professor of Religious Studies and American Indian and Native studies, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Ia.)
3. Identify omissions of peoples of color and the ideas that they bring to the table in the media, arts, and sports, and in economic and cultural life in general. (Boyoung

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Lee, associate professor of Educational ministries, Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley, Calif.)

4. Be fully conscious of, and recognize discrepancies within, one's own operating worldview and move beyond those discrepancies. (Boyung Lee)
5. Fully investigate others' interpretations of the human condition, and participate in the building up of a community of interpreters. (Boyung Lee)
6. Trace ways in which commonsense knowledge and assumptions make it difficult to see oppression. (Anonymous)

The following competencies are drawn from Ross B. MacDonald and Monica C. Bernardo, 2005. "Reconceptualizing Diversity in Higher Education: Borderlands Research Program." *Journal of Developmental Education* 29, no. 1: 8.

- Explore issues for which there are not known answers
- Work deeply with multiple perspectives, incorporating a variety of disciplines as appropriate
- Recognize the complexity of issues and of the people affected by those issues
- Understand that the nature of the answers one develops is a truth that is to some degree limited by the frameworks from which one operates